

CONSTRUCTIVE CLASSROOM REWARDS: PROMOTING GOOD HABITS WHILE PROTECTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Rewarding children in the classroom need not involve candy and other foods that can undermine children's diets and health and reinforce unhealthful eating habits. A wide variety of alternative rewards can be used to provide positive reinforcement for children's behavior and academic performance.

“IT’S JUST A LITTLE TREAT”: THE HARM IN USING FOOD TO REWARD CHILDREN

Schools should not only teach children how to make healthy choices and to eat to fulfill nutritional needs, but also should provide an environment that fosters healthy eating. Providing food based on performance or behavior connects food to mood. This practice can encourage children to eat treats even when they are not hungry and can instill lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting themselves with food behaviors associated with unhealthy eating or obesity. Awarding children food during class also reinforces eating outside of meal or snack times. Since few studies have been conducted on the effect of using food rewards on children's long-term eating habits, **the best policy is not to use food to reward children for good behavior or academic performance.**

THE VALUE OF REWARDING CHILDREN (WITH NON-FOOD REWARDS)

As teachers know, classroom rewards can be an effective way to encourage positive behavior. Children, like everyone, alter their actions based on short-term anticipated consequences. When trying to foster a new behavior, it is important to reward a child consistently each time he or she does the desired behavior. Once the behavior has become an established habit, rewards can be given every now and then to encourage the child to maintain the preferred behavior.

The ultimate goal of rewarding children is to help them internalize positive behaviors so that they will not need a reward. Eventually, self-motivation will be sufficient to induce them to perform the desired behavior, and outside reinforcement will not longer be necessary.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND FOOD SHOULD NOT BE LINKED TO PUNISHMENT

Punishing children by taking away recess or physical education classes reduces their already-scarce opportunities for physical activity. Another counter-productive punishment is forcing children to do physical activity such as running laps or pushups. Children often learn to dislike things that are used as punishments. Thus, penalizing children with physical activity might lead them to avoid activities that are important for maintaining wellness and a healthy body weight. In addition, food should not be withheld as a means of punishing children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture prohibits withholding meals as a punishment for any child enrolled in a school participating in the school meal programs. ¹

EXAMPLES OF BENEFICIAL (AND INEXPENSIVE) REWARDS FOR CHILDREN ²

***SOCIAL REWARDS**

“Social rewards,” which involve attention, praise, or thanks, are often more highly valued by children than a toy or food. Simple gestures like pats on the shoulder, verbal praise (including in front of others), nods or smiles can mean a lot.

These types of social rewards affirm a child’s worth as a person.

***RECOGNITION**

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*Trophy, plaque, ribbon, or certificate in recognition of achievement or a sticker with an affirming message (e.g. “Great job”)

* Recognizing a child’s achievement on the school-wide morning announcements. and/or the school’s website

*A photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school

*A phone call, email, or letter sent home to parents or guardians commending a child’s accomplishment

*A note from the teacher to the student commending his or her achievement.

***PRIVILEGE**

*Going first

*Choosing a class activity

*Helping the teacher

*Taking a walk with a teacher or principal

* Listening with a headset to a CD

* Eating lunch with teacher or principal

- * Sitting by friends or in a special seat other
- * Teaching the class
- *No homework pass
- *Making deliveries to the office
- * Reading the school-wide morning announcements
- *Helping in another classroom

- *Playing an educational computer or game
- *Reading to a younger class
- *Taking care of the class pet for a day
- *Writing or drawing on whiteboard

*REWARDS FOR A CLASS

- *Extra recess
- *Eating lunch outdoors
- *Going to lunchroom first
- *Reading outdoors
- *Holding class outdoors to go with science or studies unit
- *Dancing to music

- *Playing games or doing puzzles
- *"Free choice" time @ end of day
- *A book read aloud to class by teacher
- * A field trip or speaker in classroom
- *Listening to music while working

A token or point system, whereby children earn points that accumulate toward a bigger prize. Possible prizes include those listed above

CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS TO USE FOOD IN THE CLASSROOM

- *Healthy food tasting to go with science or social studies unit
- *Tasting ethnic foods to go with social studies unit
- *BEANS activities –see below

BEANS—Blending Education, Agriculture and Nutrition in schools sponsored by the Missoula Farm to School program and Garden City Harvest to offer teachers and students educational opportunities to explore various aspects of local food systems, gardening and farming, and personal and environmental health. They offer interactive classroom lessons and activities, including the mobile cooking cart, as well as experiential field trips to the MCPS's Central kitchen facility and the PEAS Farm in the Rattlesnake. Some funding is available for tours and field trips. Contact